

The Feeding of the Five Thousand – it’s an interesting lesson to feature in the middle of Lent. Lent focuses heavily on the conflict between our Lord and the devil. It features themes of hypocrisy, temptation, and testing. We’re reminded just how great the stakes are in this conflict and what our Lord has done to win the victory for us. And in the middle of all that, Jesus multiplying loaves and fish. What’s the connection?

I think it has to do with reminding us of how Jesus provides for us. In our own lives, when we are being tempted and tested and attacked by the devil, one thing that we can start to worry about is our Lord’s provision and care for us. And so we hear from the Scriptures how even as Jesus was on earth, headed toward the cross, He still abundantly provided for His people, and He’ll still provide for us today.

The first thing we see in this text is how our Lord does allow the question of provision to be a test for us, but at the same time He already has the answer. Jesus and the disciples have gone into the remote areas beyond the Sea of Galilee, seeking some rest. Yet the crowds follow Jesus out there, looking for Him to bring healing upon the sick. Jesus has compassion on them, knowing their needs and desiring to provide for them.

It’s in this context that He puts the situation forth to His disciples as a test. Jesus turns to Philip and asks, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” Put yourself in Philip’s shoes. There’s a crowd of thousands coming toward you. You’re in the middle of nowhere. Where are you going to buy bread? It’s impossible!

Philip replies, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little!” Two hundred denarii is a lot of money, almost certainly more than they have on hand. And even if they did have that much money, it would provide little more than a bite or two, not enough to actually satisfy anyone’s hunger. From a worldly perspective, it’s a seemingly insurmountable challenge.

Why does Jesus ask, then? As the Bible tells us, “He said this to test him.” Jesus was seeing if Philip would trust in Him, rather than relying on the things of the world. Reason and resources weren’t enough; it would take faith in Jesus to get through this. And that faith wouldn’t be disappointed, because, as the Bible also tells us, “for He Himself knew what He would do.”

As Philip is wracking his brain trying to figure this seemingly impossible problem out, Jesus already has the answer. He already had the answer before the crowd was even in view. He knew that there would be a little boy there with five loaves and two fish, and He knew that by His almighty power He would multiply them into a feast for thousands.

It was never in doubt that Jesus would provide for these people; that’s what He does as the God who is love. What was being tested was Philip’s faith. Philip didn’t know what Jesus knew. He couldn’t have known the specifics, the exact way in which Jesus would work. But he had seen Jesus work incredible signs in the past. He had heard Jesus say that He was, in fact, God. And so, he could

and should have simply confessed that, though he couldn't see how, he trusted that Jesus would be able to provide food for the great crowd.

Our Lord tests us in similar ways to how He tested Philip. I'm guessing that most, maybe all, of you have been put in situations that, at the time, seemed nearly impossible. You were confronted by a need that, from a worldly perspective, couldn't be met. These tests are put before us so that we'll put our trust in the Lord with whom all things are possible.

And that trust is never misplaced, because just like with the test put to Philip, the Lord already knows the answer. Before your God sends a trial your way, He has already established the way in which you will be delivered. Before the Lord lays a cross upon you, He has already set the date when He will be taking it off of you. He has promised to provide all that you need, both for this life and for the life to come. The test is sent in order for you to believe in His promise.

The next point that this text teaches about God's provision is how our God provides for us using things that we would see as insufficient or inadequate. This is seen with the next disciple we encounter, Andrew. After Philip's comment on how not even two hundred denarii would be enough, Andrew says to Jesus, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?"

Two things are in tension here. Andrew shows some faith here, as he does bring this boy and his lunch before Jesus. If he thought it was totally hopeless, he wouldn't even have bothered. Yet at the same time, you can hear his doubts. "What are they for so many?" He's looking at what Jesus will, in fact, use to feed the thousands, but his sinful flesh is preventing him from trusting in what the Lord can do with them.

Here again is somewhere that doubt and temptation attack us as well. We can see what the Lord could or might use to satisfy our needs, but we doubt if He'll really be able to do it. Sometimes this can be in physical or worldly needs. Perhaps we look at our income, or our bank account, or our insurance benefits, and we think, "Is God really able to use that to provide what I need?" Or we look at the physical possessions that our Lord has given us – maybe our house, or our car, or something else – and think, "Will the Lord really be able to use that, or is it not enough?" This ties in to a temptation towards coveting, desiring more than God has given.

Beyond physical or worldly needs, I think that we are tempted in this way when it comes to God's word. We pick up our Bibles and we're tempted to think, "Does this really contain the power of God unto salvation?" Is God's word sufficient to create and sustain saving faith in the souls of men, or do we need to add something to it? Will confronting sin with God's word actually bring repentance, or do we need to figure out a way that we think is better? Will the Holy Spirit actually work through the Scriptures to give comfort and peace in times of sadness and trial, or do we need to round it out with our own ideas? Can I trust that God's word will really guide me in the right paths for my life, or do I need to replace some of its "outdated" thoughts with more "modern," "relevant" guidance?

These temptations are faced by individuals; they're faced by entire churches as well. We look at the word, and the Sacraments established by the word, and we think that it's just not enough. Maybe

we need more entertainment, or more committees, or more programs, or more of something else, to ensure that the church survives. We are tempted to look at the word like Andrew looked at the boy's lunch – maybe there's something there, but it seems like it just isn't going to go as far and do as much as we need.

When we fall into disbelief and doubt, like Philip and Andrew, we need to repent, and ask that our Lord would let us trust in His never-failing provision for His people. For when we do have faith in our Lord and His love and power, we see Him supply our needs in abundance. After hearing Philip and Andrew, our Lord goes ahead and does what He knew that He would do. He has the multitude sit down, takes the boy's lunch, gives thanks, and then proceeds to distribute it.

And what happens? By the power of God, these five loaves and two fish go further than even two hundred days' wages worth of bread could have gone. About five thousand men, and so including women and children, maybe, ten, fifteen, twenty thousand people, are fed. And not just with a little bit, an appetizer or snack to get them home. No, each person eats until he is full. God has satisfied their need. And what's more, He makes leftovers! As a display of His love and generosity, He makes more than is needed. Twelve baskets are filled with the pieces remaining. They end up with more food after the meal than before! Such is the care of God for His people.

Again, this is how our Lord cares for us as well. Our God promises to supply all our needs of body and soul. And the fact that we're all here today is proof that He has done exactly that. He gives daily bread to bring us to every day that He has made for us. And He continues doing that for as many days as He has ordained for us to be on this earth.

If even the laws of nature and physics – things that we take as simply absolute – if even they couldn't keep Jesus from feeding that crowd, what could stop Him from caring for us? The economy? Corruption? Weather? Not at all! Nothing can stop our Lord from providing for us, because He does so by His almighty, limitless power. Even the times where we have less than we'd like are in His hands. He sends those times for His purposes, and when that purpose is accomplished, He brings us out of them.

That deliverance from trial and want are finally seen in one of the most surprising ways, how our Lord turns even death to good for His people. Our greatest need, the thing we absolutely must have but have absolutely no way of getting on our own is righteousness. We're sinners, sinful by nature and by action, sinning by doing what we shouldn't and not doing what we should.

On our own, we can't stop sinning, and what's worse, we can't pay for or take away the sins we've already committed. All this sin dooms us to die, both physically in this life and suffering eternal death in the life to come. Our situation is even more hopeless than Philip finding money and bakeries in the wilderness for thousands of hungry people.

But what does our Lord do? He provides for our incredible need in a way only He can. He takes all our sin into Himself – something only God can do – and pays for it with His holy, precious

blood. And then, in another act that only God can do, He gives us His righteousness through the gift of faith in Him.

He does this through things that seem totally insufficient to human reason, like the boy's lunch to Andrew. He uses simple water, combining it with His word in Holy Baptism, to join us to His death and resurrection, to wash and even more to regenerate us with His own life. By the power that broke the laws of nature in multiplying bread and fish, He joins His own flesh and blood to bread and wine, so that we might partake of the great Passover lamb who is Christ Himself.

And again, He speaks to us through the words of Holy Scripture. Think about that. For less than the price of taking a family out to McDonald's, you can go to Walmart and buy a book that literally has the words of God Almighty for you. That's crazy. And that's the power and love of God at work to care for you.

This all then is directed to the greatest way our Lord provides for His people: eternity with Him in heaven. We might be tempted to think that death is when God stops providing. But for Christians, that's totally false. In fact, when a Christian dies, the Lord God uses that to bring His beloved son or daughter into His presence in glory. There, with all the angels and archangels, and the souls of the other faithful departed, the Christian dwells in perfect peace and joy.

This is followed by something even better in the new creation, where God again uses His almighty power to raise and recreate the bodies of all people and rejoins them to their souls. For the faithful, He then brings them into the new and perfect creation, which will be literally the best thing that can even happen. And how long does this last? Forever! God will perfectly provide for all His saints in this new heaven and earth forever. Perfect joy that will have no end. Perfect peace that will have no end. Perfect fulfillment and satisfaction and happiness and delight and awe... that will never end!

In the greatest act of provision ever, God has provided an eternity of perfection in paradise through the death and resurrection of His Son. Through repentance and faith He joins us to these infinitely-valuable blessings from Christ. He has provided a place in His heavenly mansion for us, and He will provide everything necessary to bring us there.

In the name of Jesus, amen.